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The trouble started when the class hamster got out of its cage. Judy Jenkins was on hamster duty and I think she forgot to close the little door after she'd replaced the hamster's newspapers. Kids are so easily distracted these days. It used to be all a teacher had to do was chant "1,2,3, eyes on me" to get a room back in order. Attention spans have gotten so bad that I've taken to firing a starter's pistol to get the kids back on track. Had to buy it myself, but the gym teacher told me the union rep is going to

see if we can get ammunition added to the budget next year.

So anyway, the hamster's cage was left open, which wasn't that big a deal in itself. Certainly not the first time it's happened. And it's not like the hamster has ever shown much interest in personal freedom before. On other occasions where I've found the cage door open, the little furball was still in there, contentedly running on its wheel, not a care in the world.

But then Scott Miller climbed on his desk—I guess he was imitating a professional wrestler he saw at the

Presidential rally or something—and in his attempt to dropkick a friend, he missed and crashed into the bookshelf. Well, the impact must have startled the hamster something terrible, because it shot out of its cage and scurried down the shelf and hid in amongst the dioramas of the President’s fourth inauguration.

You'd think it couldn't get much worse, but then someone yelled “rat” and all the girls started screaming, including Judy, who should have known better. Before I could even dig my starter pistol out of the desk drawer, the Cooper kid grabbed a broom and started

smashing dioramas like he was playing whack-a-mole at the carnival. I was horrified and without thinking, I shouted that it wasn’t a rat, just the class hamster, which in retrospect was pretty stupid on my part because that got *everyone* screaming.

What a disaster. I mean honestly, first bell hadn’t even rung yet and my classroom was a shambles: the bookshelf was destroyed, Miller was displaying more than a few concussion symptoms, and most of the class was in tears either because they thought the class hamster had been pulverized or they were furious they wouldn’t be

able to enter their dioramas in Wednesday’s patriotism contest.

Riots have started for less, so I was a little worried when someone asked who was on hamster duty and everyone turned and stared at Judy and the now-empty cage. The poor girl looked mortified. I do think it was just an honest mistake; I certainly didn’t think she was trying to make a political statement or anything, but I guess some of the children thought otherwise because suddenly Billy Finn started shouting about “political prisoners” and “due process” and out he comes with this flag.

Now I thought it was an ordinary flag, no different than the ones hanging in the classrooms, hallways, bathrooms, and the forty-five flags in the gym. The only difference was Billy's flag didn't have the President's name on it. Well, you can imagine the uproar that caused. Look, nobody has more respect for the First Amendment than I do, but, as James Wilson said, "Without law, liberty also loses its nature and its name, and becomes licentiousness." My undying appreciation for free speech aside, Billy had crossed a dangerous line. So the Patriotism Officer had to

come down and remove Billy and his flag.

You know, teaching is hard enough with the regular interruptions—protests, counter-protests, lockdown drills, Krav Maga training—so I hardly have time to deal with something like spontaneous civil unrest. I don’t even have free periods anymore because I have to use that time to make homework packets for all the children who started working at the refinery so they don’t fall too far behind. Not to mention, the last thing any teacher wants to do in this political climate is give oxygen to a rabble-rouser. So you can understand why

I tried to move on quickly from Billy Finn’s seditious outburst and get to the lesson I had planned.

But then *of course* someone asked why the President’s name wasn’t on Billy’s flag. This is something we normally covered in class, but the state boards were still printing the new workbooks with the new pictures of all the old flags with the president’s name on them. I wasn’t about to touch that topic until we got those books, so I pretended not to hear the question.

Then the Schmidt girl wondered aloud if there was a time when the president wasn’t the president, and

then the Patriotism Officer had to come take her too, that’s just basic stuff. It’s number four on the "Classroom Rules" board that sits right next to the door.

That's when I took the opportunity to suggest that it would be better for everyone if we all just forgot about Billy Finn and his flag. Then I had them all stand and say the Pledge of Allegiance, you know, to reset the room. But then nobody could remember which version to sing, on account of all the recent changes to the words. I’ve been saying it for weeks, just put “under God” at the end of every line and save us the trouble. The P.O.

returned just in time to hear the Dinato boy and Jeff McCoy’s son, Robbie, flub their lines, so out they went too.

At this point, I noticed a few students stealing glances at the rules board. I thought it might be handy to have the kids read the rules aloud, and I put extra emphasis on rule number seven: “Don’t ask where the Patriotism Officer takes unpatriotic students.”

When that was over, I started to write the day's lesson on the chalkboard, but the Cornwell boy, who never missed an opportunity to derail classroom progress, asked

if Billy had smuggled the flag in from Portland or one of the other ‘No-Go Zones’. Everyone gasped. As far as my class was concerned, anything from Portland must be radioactive. So for the second time in a month, I had to drag the Geiger counter out from the art closet. I knew it was a waste of time but it had to be done. Even first-year teachers will tell you, there’s no way you can get kids to focus if they think they are being exposed to radiation.

By the time I packed the Geiger counter away, I had lost so much time that I’d be lucky to get to the first vocabulary hand-out.

Meanwhile, the Patriotism Officer had taken up permanent residence at my desk, his presence an implicit threat that any more subversive behavior would be handled swiftly and with extreme prejudice. I appreciated the calming effect this had on the class and began my lecture on one of our most important patriotic traditions—voting for the President.

These students have been voting since kindergarten, but the new law lowering the voting age to the third trimester had just been passed, and State Ed.’s updated curriculum made it my responsibility to teach the students

that voting from birth was how things have always been. Not an easy task with such an inquisitive group, not to mention the added pressure of the P.O. scrutinizing my every word.

My heart rate jumped when the Dugan boy raised his hand. Dugan was one of those irritatingly clever kids who loved getting a rise out of his teachers. I thought for sure he was going to insist he hadn’t voted before kindergarten, and the others would agree and then the P.O. would narrow his eyes and probably notice the smashed dioramas, and then I’m the one

getting dragged out of here kicking and screaming.

To my relief, he asked how anyone was supposed to make an informed decision at such a young age. I told him if he did his homework more often, maybe he'd be better informed. The P.O. got a good chuckle out of that one.

Then the Wenerstadt boy asked who the President's opponent was and did he have a strong political platform. I didn't even have a chance to make up an answer before the P.O. got him out of there too.

Maybe it was because so many of their classmates had been removed at that point, but after the P.O. took Wenerstadt, a hush fell over the remaining students. At first I thought it was just fear, but as I moved around the room handing out vocab sheets, I sensed a solemnity to the silence that suggested a change had occurred, like a door to some greater understanding had started to swing open.

Then someone asked if there was a difference between patriotism and nationalism, which were two of our vocabulary words. I said sure, patriotism is pride in one’s country,

whereas nationalism is the belief that your national culture is superior to others—

—And they said that the line between the two gets a little fuzzy sometimes.

And I said the voters have an ethical obligation to the republic and to each other to reject leaders espousing nationalistic ideals, lest we risk our democracy crumbling under the fascistic impulses of power-hungry demagogues. Nobody wants to end up like Equatorial Guinea.

And they asked how political movements can ever succeed in

overthrowing entrenched authoritarian regimes.

And I said they must capture the hearts of the proletariat.

And they asked if it’s the proletariat who suffer most, why do they support leaders who keep them in metaphorical chains?

And I said because the ruling class has papered their cages with the trappings of patriotism and convinced them that the bars in which they are confined are the only thing keeping them safe—

—And then the P.O. returned, and one of the boys in the back of the

class farted and everyone had a nice laugh.

Class was nearly over and I was feeling pretty defeated about how unproductive the day had been. Then Cindy Fontaine asked why the President’s face wasn’t on Mount Rushmore. Poor girl must have gotten one of the really old textbooks at the beginning of the year. I shot the P.O. an embarrassed look and confiscated it.

That’s when it happened—one of those ‘Aha!’ moments that every good teacher experiences from time to time.

“Let’s have a field trip”, I announced. I led the students out to the parking lot, where we set fire to Cindy’s book, just like the faculty do at the monthly parent-teacher conferences when the parents tell us which books are too offensive to have in schools. The kids were thrilled about getting to do something so grown-up and patriotic, and even the P.O. must have been impressed because he was nice enough to discreetly remove Cindy before we re-entered the building, so the children could enjoy the experience without distraction.

I was feeling positively buoyant when we returned to the classroom, so swept up in the energy of the children chattering excitedly about the book burning that I almost didn't notice that the hamster was back in its cage. I announced the good news, but none of the children seemed to care. They had forgotten all about the hamster and Billy Finn's flag and everything else that had happened. When the bell rang they were still talking about what a great lesson it had been, which is really what this job is all about. Every day it becomes harder to remember why we do this job, but

then you have one of those rare days where you find a way to truly connect with your students and get them excited about learning and, man, there's no better feeling in the world.